



BDA Certification



## Converting your farm – arable and horticulture

**Converting your farm to organic is a bold and courageous move. Here are some key aspects to consider for horticulture and arable crops.**

### How do I become organic?

First of all, your holding must go through a conversion period in order for the land and crops to achieve organic status. During the conversion, you must manage the holding according to the organic standards. You can convert the whole holding in one step, convert the whole holding in stages, or convert only part of the holding. You cannot grow the exact same crop on organic land and on non-organic land at the same time because of the risk of mixing up the two harvests.

### How long does it take until I can sell my produce as organic?

Most land conversions take two years.

- Crops harvested after the first year can be sold or labelled as 'in conversion'
- Crops sown after the two year conversion have full organic status
- Perennial crops such as soft fruit, top fruit, and many herbs need a third year of conversion; perennial crops harvested after the third year have full organic status

Where there is evidence that no prohibited inputs have been used on the land prior to the start of conversion, it may be possible to reduce the overall conversion time by 4 months, or, with approval from Defra, by up to 12 months.

In order to have an organic crop as soon as possible, it makes sense to start your conversion early in the spring, before you start sowing or drilling the majority of your crops.

### Do I have to use organic seeds?

Under the organic standards you must use organic seed and organic propagating material (such as seed potatoes, onion sets, rhubarb crowns) wherever possible. There is a fairly good supply of a wide range of organic seeds and seed potatoes.

However, if there is no suitable organic seed or propagating material available, your certification body can give you permission to use untreated, non-organic seed or propagating material. You must ask your certification body for permission, or request a derogation, before buying the non-organic seed or propagating material. For a list of available organic seed, check out the official database at [www.organicxseeds.co.uk](http://www.organicxseeds.co.uk).

Any bought in annual transplants must come from organic certified plant raisers – there is no possibility to use non-organic vegetable transplants.

If you buy in seed or potting compost for your own plant raising, you must use a product that is organically approved.

### **Will I be able to use the same varieties?**

You will need to choose varieties that are suited to your farming system and your climate and soils. Switching to organic production methods may mean that varieties with pest and disease resistance become more important to you. Some organic growers also like to prioritise varieties for their taste, unusual appearance or heritage value.

### **Can I still plough?**

Healthy soil is the basis of organic farming; healthy living soils support healthy crops. You will need to ensure that your cultivation system maintains and builds good soil structure, soil biodiversity and organic matter levels, and that you are not contributing to erosion or compaction of your soils. So yes, you are free to continue ploughing (or not) so long it works for your soil and situation.

### **What about crop rotation?**

Crop rotation is a requirement of the organic standards. A good crop rotation can play an important role in managing pests, diseases and weed burden, as well as helping to maintain soil fertility. It is worth giving your crop rotation some real thought and planning. Many organic farmers and growers make use of green manures or other crops grown primarily for their contribution to protecting the soil, fixing nitrogen and/or building soil organic matter.

### **How do I ensure good crop nutrition?**

On an organic farm the aim is to operate close to self sufficiency, so that crop nutrition needs are met through cultivating soil health, incorporating nitrogen fixing crops and green manures in the rotation, grazing livestock, and use of composted manures from the holding.

However, this closed loop approach to fertility is not always achievable in practice, especially in intensive vegetable growing. It is acceptable, and quite normal, for organic growers to bring in manure, and plant composts. All manures must come from extensive farming.

Synthetic fertilisers are prohibited in organic farming, but where there is evidence of need, for example through soil or tissue testing, it is possible to use a range of soil amendments and fertility treatments, including trace elements, rock phosphate, seaweed, kieserite and other natural or basic substances. There is a full list of permitted fertility inputs in Appendices 1 and 2 of our standards. You do need to check that all products are suitable for use in organic production – even products labelled as organic may not actually meet the requirements of the standards.

### **And how do I deal with pests and diseases?**

In an organic system, prevention and control of pests and disease is based on healthy soil and plants, crop rotation, use of resistant varieties, careful monitoring, physical barriers, strategic planting and sowing times, and encouragement of pest predators.

Nearly all pesticides are prohibited under the organic standards, but where there is a need it is possible to use a range of more natural plant protection products such as plant oils, microorganisms, and diatomaceous

earth. As a last resort copper, sulphur and pyrethrins can be used. There is a full list of permitted plant protection products in Appendix 4 of our standards.

### **Can I use herbicides?**

Herbicides cannot be used on organic farms, even as a last resort, so a careful strategy for weed control is necessary. Organic growers make use of stale seed beds, strategic sowing and planting times, a range of mechanical weeding and cultivation tools, thermal weeding, hand weeding, under sowing, and mulches. No dig approaches are increasingly common in smaller scale organic veg growing.

### **What are the rules on labelling?**

You can only label your produce as organic once you have completed conversion. You will need to submit all labels to us for approval before you use them so that we can all be confident they are compliant with the regulations. We have separate guidance with detailed labelling requirements.

### **Is my veg box scheme covered?**

Do bear in mind that if you carry out any packing, labelling or processing on the holding, or if you have any subcontractors doing this for you, these activities will also need to be certified. This could include, for example, a veg box scheme, any home made preserves, and even storage of potatoes or grain off site.

Depending on the type or scale of the activity this may be included within your production license, or may require an additional processing license.

### **What is the inspection like? Is there a lot of paperwork?**

All organic operators have an annual inspection, and occasionally an additional unannounced inspection. Our inspectors are professional, but friendly and totally human. At the annual inspection the inspector will want to walk your land, see your crops, understand your farming systems, and check your record keeping. The inspection can usually be carried out within half a day, but might be longer for a large or complex operation.

It's important that you keep full records of all your purchases and inputs, production and sales. Much of this record keeping will be in line with wider government requirements or general good practice, but there is likely to be a small increase in paperwork to enable your organic certification. We may also be looking at your records from a different perspective than any other bodies – for example, we need to see that you are using organic seed and that your crop protection products are compliant with the standards.

**If you have any questions about the conversion process, the organic standards, or certification, please do get in touch with our small friendly team and we will do our best to help.**

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